

teaching emotional intelligence

Evidence is mounting that social and emotional learning strategies are critical to promoting academically solid, bully-free schools.

With the well-publicized escalation of teen suicide attributed to school bullying, today's educators are ramping up their efforts to create safe, bully-free campuses. If anything positive has come from this horrific epidemic, it's that school leaders are reconsidering a concept that has been elbowed out of the way in the exclusively academic climate of No Child Left Behind – the importance of teaching students to respect others.

What was once considered a value as basic as pencils and paper has been left behind in the educational race to the top. There is a growing body of evidence, however, that suggests that getting back to the Golden Rule through the use of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies may be a worthwhile investment in promoting an academically solid, bully-free learning environment.

The systematic development of a core set of skills that helps kids navigate life's moral and interpersonal challenges is at the heart of SEL theory, and many

By Lauri Massari

schools are getting on board. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning defines SEL as the processes through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills they need to recognize and manage their emotions, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging social situations constructively.

They add up to what is known as emotional intelligence, and they are rapidly gaining ground. Educators are taking note of the mounting evidence proving that SEL competencies are critical to academic achievement, school safety, and particularly to addressing the issue of bullying.

Understanding the problem of bullying

Because bullying intrudes on the educational rights of as many as 30 percent of our nation's youth, leads to 160,000 school absences per day, and contributes to an alarming increase in suicide, it is at the national forefront of school safety concerns.

While most administrators understand the global realities of the problem, the larger challenge lies in their ability to recognize bullying on their own campuses. In the adolescent world, secrecy on behalf of peers is, and forever shall be, sacrosanct. With most students adhering to this unspoken but universally understood gag order, bullying incidents remain largely unreported. Consequently, far too many of our children continue to be haunted on campus and in the halls of cyberspace. They suffer in silence while parents, classmates and staff remain oblivious.

Solutions for schools

There remains no simple solution to a problem as complex as the society it mirrors, but most will agree that the status quo isn't working. Though the post-Columbine influx of state mandated policies might reduce some rough-and-tumble schoolyard bullying, they've done little to expose the more covert forms of emotional bullying, such as relational aggression and cyber bullying. While such punitive policies may satisfy a victim's immediate right to justice and cover the school's legal obligation,

many agree they merely put a Band-Aid on a wound plaguing generations.

Recognizing that our schools need a more intrinsic change, where individuals innately prefer to engage in peaceful interactions and where all students find bullying unacceptable, researchers are doing more to get to the heart of the matter. According to SEL theory,

culture not only creates, but also often condones. Many concerned stakeholders are beginning to assert that schools can, and must, be doing more.

Among those carrying the torch is Education Secretary Arne Duncan, who embraced SEL as a top priority toward helping schools meet the challenge. Congress



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that means taking a long, hard look at what's going on in the hearts of our kids.

In a society that often finds entertainment in the degradation of others, our students are inundated with mixed messages through the media, from politicians, and even from their own parents. The blatant chasm between what is acceptable behavior for adults and what children are being taught is bullying makes it difficult for schools to convince students that bullying is wrong. Yet schools are held responsible for correcting the behavior that the larger

is now considering The Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act (H.R. 4223), which would designate funding to expand SEL programs nationwide, further validating the efficacy of an educational movement that many believe is long overdue.

SEL instruction speaks to the value of weighting emotional intelligence as the essential counterpart to academic intelligence. Emotionally intelligent students stand out. Their ability to empathize, control emotions, communicate effectively, make responsible decisions, solve problems, persevere and get along with others earns them many friendships and the respect of their contemporaries. They tend to enjoy satisfying relationships, are highly productive, inspire productivity in others, and are able to set and attain goals. They earn better grades and, according to the evidence, do better on standardized tests than their peers.

A recent study from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning indicates that students developing emotional intelligence through SEL instruction improved by 11 percentage points on stan-

dardized tests compared to their counterparts who did not receive SEL instruction. Students with greater social and emotional competency are less likely to be aggressors, targets of bullying or passive bystanders (CASEL.org).

Recognizing that the true challenge in eliminating bullying lies in our ability to redefine adolescent norms in the minds of the kids themselves, SEL provides these new norms in clear terms, through five foundational skills. These skills are defined as self-awareness, self-management, social aware-



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ness, relationships and responsible decision making.

Self-awareness and self-management

Studies show that both bullies and victims lack effective emotional awareness and regulation skills, which, if corrected, could help decrease the incidents of bullying significantly. In a 1999 study by Bosworth, Espelage and Simon, researchers found that children who are the angriest are the most likely to bully others. According to a 2009 study by Analitis, students displaying higher levels of sadness and emotional vulnerability are more apt to be the victims of bullying.

Hyperactivity and emotional outbursts are the two factors reported by students as being the most likely to irritate and provoke peers into teasing and bullying. When students learn to self-monitor and regulate themselves, these behaviors subside. Students, teachers and administrators then enjoy a more productive learning environment with fewer disciplinary distractions, including bullying.

SEL helps shift the focus away from the often-controversial labyrinth of issues that incite bullying, rendering them irrelevant.

There is never a reason to mistreat another human being, regardless of one's political, social or religious beliefs. In the spirit of self-awareness and self-management, students begin to pay attention to, care about, and take responsibility for their own actions in any context. When students can learn to recognize their own behavioral tendencies, manage them independently, and develop healthier patterns, all incidents of school violence, including bullying, will subside.

Social awareness

Once students have their own behaviors in focus they can then widen the lens to the more complex world of tolerance, appreciation and acceptance of others. They learn to step outside their developmentally egocentric selves to experience the ultimately grown-up emotion of selflessness, known as empathy.

The 2007 research of Swearer and Cary suggests that bullies and passive bystanders typically lack empathy for their victims, and that they view being different from the social norm as the justification for bullying. When active bystanders of bullying were asked why they chose to intervene, they described experiencing feelings of empathy for

the victim and a concern for the well being of all people as motivating factors. Teaching empathy not only transforms bullies but also propels bystanders into action.

When bystanders do assert their disapproval of a bullying incident, the assault usually ends in fewer than 10 seconds in about half the cases (Salmivalli, 1999). The impact of this statistic alone is compelling many educators to devote daily instruction to raising social awareness and to recruiting bystanders into activism.

Changing the school culture

At Del Sur Middle School in Lancaster, the counseling department's core focus on SEL concepts of social awareness through bystander activism led to an increase in student perceived safety of 30 percent. Initially, only 62 percent of Del Sur students reported feeling safe at school. This number jumped to 92 percent at the conclusion of the first year of implementing the school's comprehensive SEL anti-bullying program.

According to Westside Union SD Superintendent Gina Rossall, the improvement at Del Sur School is attributed to a change of culture relative to bullying. She said, "Prior to the program's implementation, many students overlooked how critical bystanders are in perpetuating bullying. This program helps students understand how they are condoning bullying by not responding, and how to be part of the solution."

SEL instruction at Del Sur consists of six counselor-created classroom lessons, which are presented by counselors during advisory periods. Counselors at Del Sur engage student leaders in conducting these SEL lessons for their peers. This development gave breath to the seedling student ambassador program now known across the city of Lancaster as the Del Sur Middle School True Leaders.

The highly published success of Del Sur's SEL program gained community recognition and provided a model to inspire a city-wide anti-bullying campaign, rallying 20 secondary schools across four neighboring school districts, 200 student ambassadors, the mayor and the city council.

City of Lancaster Mayor R. Rex Parris was quoted in the town's local paper as saying, "This is precisely the type of program

that needs to be implemented in every school facing challenges with bullying" (AV Press, March 9, 2010).

Relationship skills

Building healthier relationships is central to ending the bullying cycle among children. For both bullies and victims, relationships with friends and family members tend to be riddled with conflict (Society for Research in Child Development, 2008). The ability for children to initiate and sustain friendships and other relationships can potentially impact a student's entire social, professional and personal future.

Far too often, however, victims of bullying are left out of the process. SEL instruction helps all students become more proactive about their own well being, including those on the receiving end of bullying.

Victims of bullying are typically withdrawn and lack confidence and skills in effectively interacting with peers. With this lack of peer support, victimized children are less likely to have classmates come to their defense when they are bullied. They also tend to lack problem-solving strategies when it comes to getting along with others.

Victims who apply strategic problem solving are found to be 13 times more effective at de-escalating conflicts than are the aggressive, retaliatory or emotionally reactive responses most frequently used by targeted children (Wilton *et al.*, 2000). Without such assertive strategies, victims resort to a passive mode of tolerating the bullying by avoiding, acquiescing or ignoring the issue.

Tools for victims

Teaching victims a more effective strategy, such as talking with others to find a solution or asking for help, can give victims the tools needed to more permanently overcome the predicament. Developing resiliency in students who continually find themselves as targets diminishes their vulnerability not only to bullying, but also to a future filled with endless injustices.

The 2006 research of Golbaum, Craig, Pepler & Connolly suggests that having high-quality friendships, or at least one best friend, can help prevent children from being victims. Interventions that teach peer-

rejected children to engage in more positive communications with peers can help them be more accepted by peers, less likely to be bullied, and more likely to be assisted by peers if targeted by a bully.

Problem-solving skills

According to the findings of Pellegrini's 2002 research, both bullies and victims tend to be emotionally volatile and to react be-

fore thinking through the consequences. Problem solving requires an evaluation of possible and likely consequences in decision making. To the extreme, many young people contemplating suicide lack logical problem-solving skills and tragically, resort to the unthinkable. Stuck in an emotional prison, troubled kids rely on irrational, self-destructive impulses for decision making, with potentially fatal results.

A photograph of a classroom showing several students at their desks. In the foreground, a young girl with her hand raised is smiling. Behind her, other students are also raising their hands. The background shows more students and classroom elements like desks and papers. The overall atmosphere is bright and educational.

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No educator disputes the importance of teaching problem-solving skills in math, yet the notion of helping kids acquire the skills so influential in the daily interpersonal minutia of adolescent life is conspicuously left out of the equation.

Almost every educator's mantra is that the choices kids make today have enormous impact on their futures. But how many of our highly coveted instructional minutes are allocated to proactively helping students learn to make such crucial decisions? Students are faced with dozens of choices each and every day, but many have no sense of direction, no guidance from home, and no motivation to sometimes choose the less popular but morally correct path.

SEL instruction helps instill a set of tangible cognitive procedures kids can use to control impulses and make thoughtful decisions, nurturing an internal locus of control in students, illuminating options, and ultimately saving lives.

The dehumanization of bullying

Through its five foundational skills, SEL provides tools for developing in students an empathetic understanding of the dehumanization of bullying in all of its forms. Students learn to recognize the impact, either positive or negative, of their behavior upon others.

Giving bullies an opportunity to correct their behavior by teaching them the folly of their ways creates a lasting solution that can transform lives, schools, and eventually, communities. Compelling bystanders to see the moral imperative in intervening on behalf of a classmate creates a culture of compassion and unity. Empowering victims to take ownership of their happiness and value their own worth, independent of the opinions of peers, encourages healing, resiliency and hope.

When educators do devote resources to the direct and explicit instruction of social and emotional skills, schools not only become safer, but academic achievement improves. This paves the way to a reduction in school violence, ensuring a safe and distinguished learning environment. Fostering a school climate of inclusion, warmth and respect is time and resources well spent, and a proven investment in a future earnestly striving to be free of bullying. ■

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